
The Way of Slaying Dragons: The Hero Myth in Contemporary Society

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Published in *Acta Institutionis Philosophiae et Aestheticae*, Vol. 16, 1998, pp. 109-116.

It seems almost unfashionable to speak of heroes today. Heroes are the stuff of legend, Ancient Greek heroes, Knights of the Grail, and, for some, revolutionary figures of Independence struggles. Heroes stood apart from the society and mores of their time, and stood for what they believed in. They achieved what they set out to do at great cost to themselves, often at the cost of their own lives. Many perished nameless or have been forgotten, while those we remember are exalted as prophets, martyrs, or saints, or perhaps cursed as traitors or witches.

There seem to be few contemporary heroes. Just as the word "myth" has acquired an overtone of falsehood, as in a story which people may believe but which is ultimately untrue, so when we think of heroes we think of people whose courage, while admirable, is perhaps misplaced. Indeed, heroes are careless, their risk-assessment is flawed, and their singular sense of purpose can make them dangerous fanatics, not to mention the fact that their private lives are usually not beyond reproach. In a world of decision by consensus, democratic elections, checks and balances, and insurance policies, the hero seems out of place. On the other hand, we may think of Nelson Mandela or Mother Theresa as great heroes, as model-figures for us to emulate, who have shown by their courage and virtue what an individual can do or aspire to.

Here, however, I want to discuss the individual as hero, the everyday everyman hero, with his cellular phone and briefcase, his mechanic overalls, her graduate students and committee meetings, her housecleaning duties, her sixteen-hour day in some garment sweatshop, or his unemployment no-man's-land. What would such a contemporary hero be, or, in other words, what does heroism still mean for us today?

I. The hero's journey

We are all, without exception, embarked on the hero's path, pilgrims on the journey. This is the journey which we take as we are engaged in this life: "*nous sommes embarques*", Sartre wrote. The journey has few certitudes: we do not know where we are going, what fate has in store for us, or even how long the journey will last. We have accumulated plenty of baggage on this path already: the *situation* we are in, our upbringing and education, our experiences and the lessons we have learnt from them. The existentialists were criticized for claiming that even our *situation* was chosen, that we are always free to opt out or change, radically free. But whether we choose this path through karma or re-incarnation, or whether it is a random act of evolution, embarked we are.

What, then, does a hero have to do? The myths and fairy-tales of all cultures and ages tell us. Joseph Campbell stressed that myths do not tell us the meaning of life, but rather describe the experience of being alive (1). The hero is someone whose deeds, actions and thoughts, whose failures as well as successes, whose specific trials and endurance, fear as well as courage, show us what the experience of life is:

"Furthermore, we do not even have to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we will come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world" (2).

So where does our contemporary hero, with his cellular phone and his designer suit, find the hero-path? Campbell divides what he calls the "monomyth", the general story of the hero journey spanning religions, cultures, and time, into seventeen stages (3). In the first part of this paper, I examine three of these stages ("The call to adventure", "The crossing of the first threshold", "The road of trials"), by focusing on variations of the Errant Knight motif in medieval myths, which, for Westerners at least, probably represents the most obvious connotation of "hero". In the second part, I look at what the hero myth can teach us about the time that we are living in, and about facing the challenges of our contemporary political and economic ideologies.

The journey always starts with a call to adventure, a summons, something unexpected, the intrusion of magical reality into everyday life. One misses the bus, then one gets lost trying to make it to work by a short-cut; one enters a coffee-shop to ask for directions, ... and *voilà*, the adventure begins, and one's life is changed forever. This is possible all the time, this magical world is always present, but we prefer not to see it. We prefer to use the same bus to work everyday, to plan our free time carefully so as to maximize enjoyment and entertainment, to stick to what we know we like, and these habits banish the magical realm from our everyday life. The call to adventure may be a powerful intrusion into our daily life, a traumatic event such as an accident or the death of a friend, or getting fired, which makes us evaluate how we are living and pushes us to take the plunge into the unknown. Or it may stem from a vague dissatisfaction, a certain *Angst*, *inquietude* or *fuan* (4) which makes us doubt whether the path we are following leads anywhere, and question whether we are enjoying being on it in the first place. The call usually beckons as an invitation, an invitation to take a risk. In fairy-tales, which are simple forms of myths, we find that some incongruous character or animal tempts or leads us into the forest, symbol of the unconscious, where the magical soon takes hold of us.

The usual reaction, of course, is to refuse the call. The would-be hero is busy, has a thousand things to do, deadlines to meet, urgent work to finish. The hero-to-be has no time, no interest, and no inclination to follow this extra-ordinary summons. Or the hero-hopeful may be frightened by the strange intrusion, not able to trust it. Perhaps the man we meet is Edshu, the trickster God with two different face halves; perhaps the woman who seduces us is a heavenly Goddess which comes down at night to lie with men and leaves them dead when morning comes. The call to adventure is fraught with danger, with unexpected and unaccountable complications: it seems we have many sure things to lose and nothing tangible to gain.

We must also realize that the journey, for all its mythological trappings, colorful elves and gnomes, phantasmagoric apparitions and long, arduous treks, is in reality an inner journey, a journey to the heart of the self. The aborigine walkabout, the forty days in the desert, the American Indian vision quest are, despite their geographical nature, inner journeys, forms of meditation or contemplation. I personally find it not so difficult to equate the outer and inner journey in an abstract, conceptual sense: it provides a welcome and elegant symmetry to the dual mind-body aspect of our self-in-the-world. However, I find it much more difficult to follow this mirroring through to its ultimate conclusion, where everything is either outer or inner, depending on the perspective chosen. Not only the hero character, the helpers and

adversaries, the gold which is found at the end of the journey and brought back, but the very path itself is inside of us, as well as constituting the reality in which we act. Indeed, in many religions, we are told we are both the pilgrim and the path.

Let us say that we take the challenge, accept the call, go into the forest: we are soon faced with the trials of the hero. Of the various tests for the hero, I want to focus on two which I believe to be relevant for our situation and challenges today: entering the gate with the two guardians and slaying the dragon.

The gate with a guardian is an ubiquitous mythological motif, found in the riddle of the Sphinx as well as in Japanese and Chinese temples, which are guarded by two lions. The hero has to pass right through the center of the gate, through the eye of the needle as it were. The significance of this passage is that the hero may not take anything with her, and that the poles which she must pass through represent Fear and Desire (5). The hero must go in empty-handed, taking no weapons, no guarantees, no securities, no insurance, but she must also leave behind her wealth, status, position, and name, which mean so much in our everyday life. And while we may be happy to part with small things which we believe we can do without, we all have a list of things we do not want to give up under any circumstances.

In the act of passing through the poles of Fear and Desire, we find ancient allegories and metaphors for what we now call suppressed desires, neuroses, or psychological problems. If the individual is at war with herself, the source of conflicting and unquenchable desires, she cannot enter through the gate. The person who seeks to go through the gate laden with her self-image does not trust on the strength of the absurd, has no faith, does not want to let go, and cannot enter.

Fear in our modern world is the fear of not fitting in, the fear of not being liked, accepted, loved, and valued for who we are. This fear makes us cling to what we have accumulated. These fears have always existed, although they may occur in different guises in our contemporary society because the structure of our society has changed over time. We fear surrendering to something bigger than we are, fear letting go of what we have so painstakingly built up, a reputation, a name, a business empire, a family. We have built up a credit of money, of goodwill, or of good actions. This one is understandably attached to, the result of one's own efforts, gained at a high price, the price of repressing what one really wanted to do, the price of compromise. And yet the stark and clear requirement to enter the gate is to let go of all of this: only the hero with a pure heart and empty hands can pass through.

The other pole is the pole of Desire, the desire for riches, security, pleasure, status, entertainment; these desires keep us busy in their never-ending pursuit of an ever-receding goal. The desire to be someone other than who one really is, perhaps somehow more beautiful, smart, or socially at ease, or somehow less evil, conniving, and petty than one knows oneself to be. These desires to increase our security are very strong in all of us, and have always been very strong in all of us. Unless we see clearly how these fears and desires shape our thoughts and actions, they will weigh us down, keep us outside the gate, and the Grail Castle, the Promised Land, the Kingdom of God, and Enlightenment will always remain out of reach.

The other trial of the hero is the struggle with the dragon, ogre, monster, or demon, which is also an internal struggle. The dragon is an animal who hoards his treasure, traditionally pieces of gold and a virgin, without knowing what to do with them, since he has no use for them (6). The dragon is inside us: the inexhaustible treasure within us, and the virgin, a symbol for our anima or Muse, are guarded by the dragon which is the dragon of our fear. The ugliness of the dragon, ogre or demon represents the ugliness of our fear, the hideous nature of that which we are most afraid of.

The tactics of the hero in the fight with the dragon are instructive: it is never a question of brute force, since that would put the hero at an immediate and unsurmountable disadvantage. The hero's strategy is either using a ruse or charging ahead with nothing to lose. In the case of a ruse, the hero outsmarts the dragon by sheer cunning or by working outside the "rules": Odysseus blinds and tricks the Cyclops. By following the second strategy, the hero is willing to lose it all, to let go of everything, and this puts her at an advantage over the dragon who is attached not only to what he is guarding so jealously and covetously, but also to his own preservation.

Although courage is the virtue most commonly associated with the hero, especially in the life-and-death struggle with the monster, courage does not mean the absence of fear. Rather, courage is the recognition of one's own fear, the acceptance of it, coming to terms with it, making peace with it, a matter of taming the dragon rather than killing it. The dragon, ogre, or monster is really a misplaced God, grown covetous and myopic by his long exile from his true nature: the hero, after defeating him, restores him to his function and assigns him a productive task within the psyche.

II. The hero in contemporary society

According to Campbell, mythical symbols and events should not be interpreted in a literal or historical fashion:

"What a mythic image talks about is not something that happened somewhere or will happen somewhere at some time or other; it refers to what is now, and was yesterday, and will be tomorrow, and is forever" (7).

However, if myths are stories which are valid for all time, does it make sense to speak of a "contemporary myth" and a "contemporary hero"? How can the hero in our age be faced with challenges which have only historically come into being recently, such as the threat of atomic or ecological annihilation, if the story of myth and the images in it are neither historical nor time-bound, as Campbell claims? Is the contemporary hero on a journey which is qualitatively different from the one of those who have gone before, or are the current challenges mere variants on universal and timeless problems? While the reality of the world we live in and its pace would be nearly incomprehensible to someone from the previous century, it appears that human consciousness has not evolved much in this relatively short span of time, nor that our psyche is very different from that of our forebears.

My initial view on this matter was that there are both old and new myths and that the challenges facing us today are proper to our time. Indeed, the conceptual tools we have developed in the last century to understand the self, such as psychology, sociology, and medical advances in the study of the brain were not available before. But my view has changed as I am finding more and more that the so-called discoveries of these sciences were already known in previous ages and cultures, albeit in different form and using a different vocabulary. The essential features of human consciousness and the experiences of being alive have not changed, and this is what the myths speak about in their symbolic language. Myths, however, are *oriented* to the culture and age in which they are articulated, and this is reflected in the symbols and images of the hero's journey (8).

Our communal attempt at laying the groundwork for an eco-ethics has consisted in asking how ethical concepts, theories, and values apply to the global, free-market and technological world we live in today. The contemporary hero is faced with the typical challenges of our age. We may object that the state of the world today is not our doing, object to the way the world is run, or put our heads in the sand when confronted with the actual suffering and barbarism

which characterizes our time. However, it remains our singular challenge to acknowledge it, to respond to it, and to engage it as our project.

How, then, does the contemporary hero respond to the present challenge? The hero, as in any age, will choose her own path, without falling sway to the prevailing trend, fashionable discourses, without succumbing to the euphoria of progress or the rhetoric of domination. The end of our century is characterized primarily by speed, the ever-increasing speed of communication, business, leisure, and by globalization, the continuing dissolution of space between people, cultures, and practices. The clash of Cold War ideologies has been replaced by the hegemony of free-market ideology, global laissez-faire capitalism and competition, the survival of the fittest on both the microeconomic and macroeconomic scale. Free-market ideology thrives on fears stoked by advertising and unchecked desires let loose, and on the rhetoric of competition and domination.

The contemporary hero is now faced with a lack of time for purposes other than production or entertainment, and a lack of space for herself, both literally and metaphorically. There is no time for nurturing the self, no forty days to go on a vision quest or walkabout, no quiet, private space to pray. The contemporary hero must claim the time for the quest without the sanction of the tribe and against the prevailing current. And yet this is not so very different from the stance heroes who have gone before us had to take; the social pressures in Ancient Athens or in medieval England were perhaps of a different nature but no less suffocating.

The individual has to go against the tide and prevailing trends, the relentless wave of obligations and demands, fears and desires, to find a sense of self. Campbell calls it "following one's bliss". Following one's bliss is finding in the deep well of the self what the experience of life means to one; it is following one's heart, spirit, or muse. Ten years ago, when Campbell gave his interview series, he was asking us for one hour a day to find a quiet spot, where one can do precisely what one wants to do, a time for oneself (9). Australian aborigines are said to spend two-thirds of their waking time dealing with their unconscious, while we spend almost none.

Just as we are realizing that clean water and clean air are not inexhaustible and a temperate climate not guaranteed, so we are finding that time, space, and freedom from compulsion are not commodities the individual can take for granted in our present age. Along with an ecological consciousness, there is perhaps a need for some sort of "spiritual ecology". Just as industrial pollution threatens our physical survival, societal pollution caused by lack of time and space threatens our spiritual survival.

Every age has its sense of crisis, and ours is no exception. Multinational corporations, backed by competitive governments, are fast using up natural resources by bullying weaker societies; the exploitation and abuse of human beings is becoming more cynical and widespread; global warming is disturbing local weather patterns and the age-old rhythm of the seasons; the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer; diseases we thought we had "conquered" are becoming resistant to antibiotics, and new plagues such as AIDS are spreading. And yet the hero has always faced insurmountable odds; the dragon is terrorizing the land, demanding sacrificial victims and gold to hoard. Our society claims its own sacrificial victims in lives wasted to hunger and easily eradicable diseases in developing countries, and to overwork and self-abuse in the developed world.

The hero has two main strategies, as we have seen. Following the first strategy, the system or dragon can be beaten by a ruse, by not playing according to the rules. The dragon can never be beaten on its own terms; if one is locked in a fight with the dragon on the dragon's terms, one is sure to lose. The second strategy consists in being willing to give up more than the dragon, that is to accept to lose more than an economic or political machine bent on self-preservation. The hero must risk losing everything without knowing if the gains will materialize in her lifetime. Someone like Nelson Mandela, who risked his life and his freedom for a racially harmonious South Africa, is a classical hero type. But I am also fascinated by those who, because of their position within the system, knew exactly how much they had to lose. De Klerk and Gorbachev, for example, had everything to lose in terms of power and nothing to gain but derision, ridicule, and charges of treachery. Rabin, the war-hero who dedicated his career to the security of Israel, decided to trade the status quo for an uncertain, and perhaps illusory, peace; as he put it succinctly: "you don't make peace with your friends". In the end, the dragon, system or faceless entity has no soul, only instinct. The hero dares and risks, and prevails.

The hero today has to face contemporary challenges, variations on the challenges to heroes of all time: politicians today are not necessarily more corrupt than they were in Ancient Rome. With a combination of inventiveness, *bricolage*, and trust, the hero faces the dragons on the journey. The dragons are external as well as internal, the shape of our outside world as well as our own unresolved fears locking us in. Transmuting the inner world may seem ineffective to a society obsessed with transforming the outside world. However, as the Dalai Lama explains, you can only really change the outside world by changing your inner self. The heroes who have gone before us have shown on their path what the experience of

being alive meant to them. We cannot simply apply their techniques, although we can learn from their example, from their faith and courage. In front of one, there is as yet no path, and where one has passed, the path is already fading.

The hero today, who resides in all of us, heeds the call to adventure, and faces the gate with its two guarding deities. We can continue to pay protection money to the dragon, provide him with gold and virgins, or we can face him within ourselves and in the outer world. And while we may want to remain for a little while longer in the safe and entertaining fantasy of the bystander, deep down we know that we have already engaged in battle.

Endnotes

1. Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, (New York: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1988), pp. 4-5.
2. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, second ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 25.
3. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.
4. *Fuan* is a Japanese word which can be translated roughly as "unease". I discuss this condition in my paper "The commitment to the self", in *Acta Institutionis Philosophiae et Aestheticae*, Vol. 15, 1997, pp.129-136.
5. Sam Keen, in his examination of the hero journey, argues that the two poles the hero must pass through are Fear and Desire in Eastern Thought, and Shame and Guilt in Western (Christian) Thought (*Fire in the belly- on being a man*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 143). While the poles of Fear and Desire are essentially a Buddhist concept, and Shame and Guilt are fundamental concepts in the Christian tradition, I believe that Fear and Desire are more basic concepts than Shame and Guilt. It is possible to build a whole psychology of the human character on the Fear of pain and the Desire for pleasures, whereas it does not seem possible to build such a structure based solely on the concepts of Shame and Guilt. How Fear and Desire relate to Shame and Guilt is a question well worth pursuing.

6. Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p.184.

7. Joseph Campbell, *An Open Life*, (New York: HaperPerennial, 1990), p. 79. Claude Levi-Strauss makes a similar argument in his interview for the television program *Apostrophes*, 1984.

8. Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p. 13.